DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 395 CS 503 031

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TITLE Sources of Cultural Conflict in Common Utterances.
PUB DATE May 80
NOTE 11p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (30th, Acapulco, Mexico, May 18-23, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Code Switching (Language); *Communication Problems; Context Clues; Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; English (Second Language); *Language Usage; *Second Language Learning; *Speech Communication; *Tagalog
IDENTIFIERS *Intercultural Communication

ABSTRACT

Examples of cross cultural misunderstandings are examined in this paper to show how cultural (contextual) meaning must be regarded as an integral feature of the overall semantic meaning of an utterance. The examples, taken from the Filipino dialect Tagalog, illustrate how ignorance of the cultural assumptions and attitudes associated with an utterance may well lead to misunderstanding and conflict. What is noteworthy about these examples is that, although they are commonplace and conventional, they conceal a dimension of meaning as long as the Tagalog speaker communicates with other Tagalog speakers, either in English or in Tagalog. When the speaker talks with a native speaker of English, however, potential problems not entirely obvious to either the speaker or the hearer may occur because the speaker uses lexical equivalents in the target language and the hearer adds a cultural dimension of meaning. For these reasons, foreign language instructors should insist on having cultural notes and comments included in second language learning texts and activities. (RL)

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"Sources of Cultural Conflict in Common Utterances"

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Division Designation 5
Intercultural Communication
Acapulco, May 1980

It is a commonly known fact that interferences arising from the structure of the native language complicate the task of mastering a second language at all linguistic levels. Thus, the absence of /p/ and /æ/ in a Filipino dialect spoken in Pangasinan province, for example, is responsible for the pronunciation /fants/ instead of /pænts/. The lack of gender markers to signal "he/she" in Tagalog, the dialect spoken in the Manila area, will sometimes be responsible for the use of "she" to designate a male and of "he" to refer to a female. At the syntactic level, errors such as "I have greater aim" or "I do not have father" can be attributed to the absence of an indefinite article in Tagalog that has the identical lexical meaning of the function word "a."[1]

At the lexical level, errors tend to be even more common, for the obvious reason that hardly any vocabulary items, with the exception of scientific and mathematical formulas, have one-to-one equivalents in the target language. "Table" and "mesa" may be lexically similar within a certain, small range, but "time table" or "table of contents" have nothing to do with "mesa" as a constitutent. Near native command of the vocabulary of any language implies knowledge of different kinds of meanings such a denotative, connotative, idiomatic, and others. A non-native speaker of English may wonder, for example, why Americans prefer the euphemism "rest room" over the more direct form "toilet," particularly if the place in question is dark and smelly. The utterance "He married a lemon" compels us to the transferred, or figurative, meaning, because, as Bloomfield noted long ago, "we know that men do not go

through a marriage ceremony with a piece of fruit."[2] Idioms, of course, form a problem all of their own, and knowledge of the individual words that constitute an idiom give no indication whatever of the meaning of the phrase, such as "to put in time," "make up time," "to do time," or "to buy time."

Knowledge of the ways in which sounds and meanings correlate in a language constitutes mastery of that language in a fairly narrow, perhaps linguistic sense. But language is the principal means through which the culture of the speaker of that language manifests itself. Control of the linguistic system--its code--is therefore insufficient for one to operate comfortably, effectively, and with confidence in another culture. Indeed, thorough mastery of the code alone, as some authorities have observed, may well contribute to cultural misunderstandings, particularly if the speaker assumes that knowledge of the code is synonymous with knowledge of the cultural patterns of the native speakers of that language--or if he is unaware that culture is patterned!

The kinds of cross-cultural misunderstandings examined in this paper may well be due to such assumptions. The corpus is from Tagalog with English the target language. It must be remembered that in the Philippines English is the language of commerce and the medium of instruction in the schools from grade three on. The educated adult Filipino speaker of English has therefore had almost his entire formal education in English. He has a good command of the language code and not infrequently of many aspects of American culture.

The utterances cited in this paper are so commonly distributed that they sometimes elude detection as possible sources of cultural

conflict. Certainly the non-native speaker of English fails to perceive anything unusual in them. They are grammatically correct and lexically sensible. Nor is the native speaker of English unlikely to attribute anything more than an idiosyncratic peculiarity to these utterances at first. Paradoxically, he may attribute the peculiarities of expression to the speaker's imperfect control of the language code. But gradually, he may well be puzzled, embarrassed, and irritated as well. He is unaware that the utterances are translated word for word and that they hide a cultural dimension of meaning that conflicts with their intended meaning.

The first group to be examined falls under the category of greetings, leave-takings, and conversational openers. Consider:

Tagalog	English Lexical Equivalent
A: Saan ka pupunta?	A: Where are you going?
B: Diyan lang.	B: Just there.

Contextually, "Saan ka pupunta" is equivalent to a conversation opener such as "How are you?" It is assuredly no inquiry into the hearer's destination. The cultural equivalent in English is of course "How are you?" This greeting or conversation-opener is of course not a question about the hearer's state of health, though both utterances may signal genuine questions, such as a mother asking her child about to leave home where he is going, or a speaker inquiring about the listener's well-being.[3] The interpretation of "Saan ka pupunta" in its lexical rather than cultural sense as a conversation-opener, may therefore falsely suggest to speakers of English that Filipinos are improperly inquisitive and ill-mannered.

A similar kind of misinterpretation is possible with the translation of this Tagalog leave-taking formula:

A: Sige aalis na ako.	A: I'll go now.
B: Diyan ka na.	B: You stay there.

Contextually, the response "Diyan ka na" is equivalent to "bye now" or "be good," not a command to the guest to remain.[4]

Much has been written about Filipino hospitality and politeness. In speech patterns, these qualities are reflected in a variety of ways. One of them is the distance marker "po," a sign of respect that sets off members of different social groups. "Po" is used by a younger person to an older one, or by a person of a lower social status to one of a higher social group. Its nearest equivalent in English, "sir," is employed with much greater discrimination by Americans, and its frequent occurrence in the speech of a Filipino may sometimes convey feigned humility or irony.

Politeness is also reflected by the Tagalog speaker's avoidance of a directly negative or positive reply to a question. Direct responses that are acceptable in American English are regarded as forward, impolite, and blunt by Filipinos. Responses to an invitation, for example, are likely to be phrased in euphemistic terms:

A: Pupunta ka ba sa party?	A: Will you come to the party?
B_1: Siguro.	B_1: Perhaps.
B_2: Susubukan ko.	B_2: I will try my best.

Contextually, "siguro" may be regarded as more or less an acceptance and "susubukan ko" as a non-committal reply. The use of such apparently guarded responses can be the source of considerable puzzlement and

frustration to an American hostess, unable to predict the number of guests that she can count on. This frustration, one might note in passing, can be exacerbated by a closely associated Filipino cultural pattern that allows an invited guest to bring along intimate friends or relatives.

Conversational responses that sometimes call for critical judgments tend to be phrased euphemistically.

A: Maganda ba ang painting ni Pedro?	A: Is Pedro's painting beautiful (nice)?
B_1: Hindi masyadong maganda.	B_1: It's not so beautiful (nice).
B_2: Maganda rin naman.	B_2: It's also beautiful (nice).
B_3: Talagang maganda.	B_3: It's really beautiful (nice).

Contextually, "maganda rin naman" expresses doubt rather than praise, which it appears to suggest to a speaker of English. Misinterpretation of this phrase occurred in a survey conducted by a pharmaceutical firm in the Philippines to ascertain consumer responses to a new drug manufactured in the United States. The response was misconstrued as an acceptance of the drug, and when it was imported in large quantities into the Philippine market, it failed to sell. "Maganda rin naman,"--"it's also nice"--in its cultural sense was not an unqualified endorsement of the drug.

Underlying the use of euphemistic responses such as these is a reluctance to offend or shame anyone. That is why a Filipino student, for example, tends to accept criticism of his work as criticism of his person. The Filipino, as Fox points out, does not tend to distinguish the person from the role that person is playing:

> The criticism of a man's work as such is taken as a criticism of him as a person, reflecting upon his family as well. Employers are loath to fire incompetent workers. Among Philippine scholars, students, and scientists there

> is almost no critical review of one another's work. The bluntness of Americans and other Europeans is not understood, but tolerated because they are 'foreigners' and outside of the social system.[5]

A Tagalog speaker's response to a compliment may sometimes be the source of puzzlement to a non-native speaker of English. Consider the following:

A: Maganda ka.	A: You look beautiful.
B: Hindi naman.	B: Not really. (or "It's nothing.")

or:

A: Maganda ang damit mo.	A: It's a nice dress.
B: Hindi naman.	B: It's nothing.

or:

A: Masarap ang cake mo.	A: Your cake is delicious.
B: Talaga?	B: Really?
A: Oo, talaga.	A: Yes, really.
B: Hindi naman.	B: It's nothing.

The response "hindi naman," often accompanied by a smile, is found in situations where the English expression "thank you" would occur. The Tagalog response, however, a modest disclaimer of praise, contrasts sharply with the directness of the English cultural equivalent. An American, of course, will tend to wonder why a Filipino cannot be straightforward in accepting a compliment.

If a Tagalog speaker is not entirely familiar with American etiquette in situations where food is served, he may leave hungry and conclude that Americans are inhospitable. The reason for this is that an American hostess

does not press her guest to consume food or drink after she has extended the invitation. Filipino custom, however, requires that a host or hostess repeat the invitation at least twice or three times and that the guest accept only when the invitation has been repeatedly renewed. Consider the following:

A: Kumain muna kayo.	A: You (pl.) eat first.
B: Hindi na po, salamat.	B: No more, sir, thank you.

Only when the host repeats the invitation, using the expression "Sige na," ("Come on, already"), is the guest likely to accept.

The last example has to do with uses of the form "hiya," which can be rendered variously as "dignity," "pride," "honor," or "self-esteem." "Hiya" involves rather complex cultural patterns of behavior and defines most relationships in Tagalog culture between non-kinsmen of different social classes. Tagalog speakers of English invariably translate the term into "shame," a totally inadequate rendering that by no means suggests its complexity. Consider the following dialogue between a Filipino student and an American professor who has just extended an invitation to the student to visit his home:

A: Hindi po ako makakapunta sa inyo.	A: I cannot go to your house.
B: Bakit naman?	B: Why not?
A: Nahihiya ako.	A: I'm ashamed.[6]

Contextually, "nahihiya ako" indicates the Tagalog speaker's extreme feeling of modesty, as well as embarrassment, in a situation where he believes no reciprocity is possible. He feels obligated to the American but there is no way for him to reciprocate the professor's kindness. Hiya is what Fox

calls the "courteous almost euphemistic speech characteristics of Filipinos (searching for and giving an expected answer, avoiding a negative response)... They serve as social devices for reducing possible friction and for preventing the loss of self-esteem between non-kinsmen."[7]

These examples--others could be added easily from different languages--show unmistakably that cultural, or contextual, meaning, must be regarded as an integral feature of the overall semantic meaning of an utterance.[8] Ignorance of cultural assumptions and attitudes associated with an utterance may well lead to misunderstanding and conflict. What is noteworthy about these examples is that though they are commonplace and conventional, they conceal a dimension of meaning as long as the Tagalog speaker communicates with other Tagalog speakers, either in English or Tagalog. When he talks with a native speaker of English, potential problems not entirely obvious to either speakersor hearer may occur, because the speaker uses lexical equivalents in the target language and the hearer adds a cultural dimension of meaning, even though this is not readily apparent to him. Perhaps this is not really unusual or unexpected. More surprising would be to find foreign language instruction that suppressed traditional translation for cultural equivalents. A more modest goal doubtless would be to insist on cultural notes and comments in second language instruction and texts.

Notes

[1]William Schwab, "Some Structural Problems for Tagalog Students in English," Language Learning, VI, 1, 68-72.

[2]Leonard Bloomfield, Language (New York, 1933), p. 149.

[3]Occasionally, a Tagalog speaker will interpret the utterance "How are you?" as just that, and smile in reply, since he is uncertain of how to reply.

[4]Conversely, the expression "be good," uttered by an American professor to his student, a young Filipino, was misunderstood by the student, who responded emphatically, "I am a good girl, sir."

[5]Robert E. Fox, "The Filipino Concept of Self-Esteem," unpublished, n.d.

[6]With its purely lexical equivalent "ashamed," "hiya" can be seen in the following:

A:	Bakit hindi mo sabihin ang totoo?	A:	Why not tell the truth?
B:	Nahihiya po ako e.	B:	I'm ashamed, sir.

[7]Fox, loc. cit.

[8]How many cultural meanings, for example, can be identified in the following passage?

> Chuck and Linda were cruising down Main Street when she spied the time on a billboard.
>
> 'Oh rats,' she grumbled, 'it's getting late. My mother's afraid I'll turn into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight. We've got to move.'
>
> Chuck accelerated his candy-apple red Mustang and three minutes later they screeched into Linda's driveway.
>
> 'Too bad I've got to work the late shift tonight, Linda, but I've got to save cash for school. Can't mess around in your basement. Want to go to the drive-in this weekend?'
>
> 'Sure,' Linda said, 'I dig being with you.'
>
> They kissed, then parted.
>
> A light rain was starting to fall as Chuck eased onto the southbound freeway, choked with plant traffic.
>
> Susan Rosin